
Common Council President

15th District Alderman



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City of Milwaukee Common Council

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Futures of MPS and City of Milwaukee Inextricably Linked

I recently introduced legislation that would direct the City of Milwaukee Intergovernmental Relations Department (IRD) to “seek introduction and passage of state legislation amending provisions relating to selection of School Board members in a first class city school system.” In terms of population, Milwaukee is the only city that can be legally defined as a city of the first class in the state of Wisconsin.

For years, I have invested much of my own time to improving Milwaukee Public Schools at the grassroots level – not only as an elected official, but also as parent of two MPS students, as an alumnus, and as a member of the advisory board for one MPS institution.

For the twelve years that I have represented neighborhoods in the central city as an Alderman, including the four years that I have been Common Council President, I have been asked by countless constituents: “What can be done to improve MPS?” These residents are not talking about fixing the school-funding flaw at the state level. They are not talking about negotiating a different benefit package for our teachers. They are talking about their children. For years, they have been pleading with the City of Milwaukee to take an active role in transforming MPS into a school system that all of us can be proud of – they are saying that the City of Milwaukee should not just sit on the sidelines. We can bring our considerable resources to bear. We can be part of the solution.

I believe that the future of any major metropolitan area is intrinsically and inextricably linked to its educational system. By and large, people leave cities for one of three reasons: high taxes, rampant crime or failing schools.

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Right now, the City of Milwaukee can take steps to keep our portion of the tax burden down, which we have done. (We have kept our own tax increases lower than the rate of inflation, cut City jobs to make operations more lean, and introduced more manageable fees that have eliminated costly street assessments.) Additionally, Comptroller Morics and Finance Chair Murphy have earned the City of Milwaukee one of the highest bond ratings in the nation, meaning that their financial restraint enables us to borrow money at a lower rate than other municipalities in the United States. In terms of crime, we have hired a police chief who is getting results in reducing homicides and violent crime at a significant rate. The Common Council has audited MPD in order to uncover everything from overtime abuses to IT deficiencies, and Chief Flynn has responded to those findings with verifiable improvements.

But we have absolutely no say in the quality of education for which our constituents are paying double-digit tax increases. This cannot continue. If we want to have a world-class city, then the City of Milwaukee must have some “skin in the game.”

The specifics of my legislation – currently it is “title only” – will depend upon the results of the McKinsey study initiated by Governor Doyle and Mayor Barrett, which will provide much-needed insight into MPS finances. The Public Policy Forum’s analysis of MPS governance options, recently released, clearly demonstrates that a change in school governance is not a silver bullet. Any change in the governance structure must be rooted in the realities we face, including MPS’s financial track record, the existence of choice schools, and the degree to which our own Mayor can forge community partnerships and show the political will to push for positive change. And success will mean improving bottom-up conditions in parental involvement, as well as top-down initiatives that deal with governance.

I continue to believe that character education and life skills curricula must be part of any discussion to address deficiencies within MPS. No matter who is running the store, we have to have the right tools in stock for our students, and character education should be a cornerstone of efforts to transform MPS.

In terms of fiscal responsibility, the results of the McKinsey study will go a long way for me in determining what role the City of Milwaukee can and should play in aiding MPS. But make no mistake about it – we should play a role in ensuring that MPS is as efficient and effective as possible.

To be clear, I am not advocating for a takeover of MPS. I still believe that this school system can be a consistent producer of intelligent, productive and valuable citizens for generations to come. If the political will to carry out a change in governance does not exist, then other options must be carefully considered.

My intent is to hold off any talk of an MPS takeover for as long as possible, and I plan to do so by working to bring estranged members of the community back into the fold, to help MPS be a truly renowned school district. There is no reason that MPS cannot be the kind of school district that our teachers, administrators, board members and – most of all – students deserve. The City of Milwaukee must step into the fray and demonstrate a willingness to fight for its own future.

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